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SUBJECT: AUSTRIAN MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS: December 12, 2006

#### Prokop Defuses Haubner Law

11. In the dispute over a Social Affairs Ministry ruling, Interior Minister Liese Prokop has now taken the edge off Social Affairs Minister Ursula Haubner's controversial decree, which denied family benefits to the children of some foreign-born mothers living legally in Austria. In the future, the children's birth certificates and the mothers' residence permits, but not passports, will be required to receive the benefits. Interior Minister Liese Prokop told semi-official daily Wiener Zeitung that her move to make it possible for the non-Austrian mothers concerned to receive family benefits was "an amendment that would have been introduced anyway." Clearly, however, the change anticipates amendment of the Austrian child benefit and family compensation laws as planned by the SPOe and the OeVP, the Wiener Zeitung writes. While, the Social Democrats have welcomed the Interior Minister's decision, the BZOe has accused Prokop of having "left our common path on the alien rights package." The adaptations as implemented by Prokop were the "morning gift" of the future grand coalition, the BZOe complained.

#### No Breakthrough in Coalition Talks

12. Monday's round of coalition talks between the Social Democrats and the Conservatives failed to resolve the deadlock in the formation of a new Austrian government, although the atmosphere appears to have improved somewhat. SPOe floor leader Josef Cap stressed that, "of course" his party wants to form a government with the OeVP, and his counterpart from the OeVP said the Conservatives are willing to hold additional negotiations, if necessary. All Austrian media continue to report on the slow progress of coalition negotiations between the Social Democrats and the Conservatives. Commenting on the ongoing dispute between the two parties, SPOe floor leader Josef Cap in an interview with independent provincial daily Salzburger Nachrichten stressed it was "only natural there would be disagreement on the key issues...The important thing is for these conflicts to be solved through debate, so that in the end both parties find themselves fairly represented in a coalition agreement. (...) Better we argue now than after the formation of a government." Meanwhile, mass-circulation tabloid Kronen Zeitung quotes OeVP heavyweight and Lower Austrian governor Erwin Proell as stating on the deadlocked coalition talks that he is fed up with "this farce. The Austrian people have no understanding for this." The SPOe, he argues, "should finally put their cards on the table." Proell also complains about what he calls the Social Democrats' "double strategy" in the negotiations.

## Partial Suspension of Turkish EU Bid

13. At their meeting in Brussels yesterday, the European Union's foreign ministers agreed on a "partial freeze" of the Turkish EU membership process because of Ankara's failure to open its ports and airports to traffic from Cyprus. Negotiations in eight of the 35 policy areas will be suspended for the time being, as proposed earlier by the EU Commission. Austrian Foreign Minister Ursula Plassnik said EU ministers also agreed on more rigorous annual reviews of Turkey's membership efforts. Despite the EU's suspension of membership talks with Turkey in eight areas, negotiations on the other policy topics will continue. ORF radio quotes a Turkish international relations specialist as saying Ankara's move to open one port and airport to Cyprus was significant, because it had "immense symbolic significance for both sides." Mass-circulation provincial daily Kleine Zeitung quotes Austrian Foreign Minister Ursula Plassnik as telling journalists that the "membership negotiation process has passed its first test: There are no guarantees and nothing is automatic." Centrist daily Die Presse writes that despite their call for "sanctions," the "Turkey hardliners, including Austria have failed to assert themselves," as there will be "no de-facto deadline" for Ankara to open all its ports to Cyprus. Nevertheless, Plassnik stressed she was pleased with the outcome, calling it a "strong signal for Turkey," the daily quotes.

## Ambassador's Letter to the Editor

14. An Austrian daily publishes a letter to the editor by US Ambassador to Austria Susan McCaw regarding rendition of terrorism suspects. Liberal daily Der Standard publishes a letter to the editor by US Ambassador Susan McCaw, who argues that some "recent media reports may have led to a misunderstanding among some readers about the policy of the United States in our discussions with the European Union concerning the rendition of suspected terrorists." The United States, Ambassador McCaw continues, has been in a "useful dialogue with the EU, both in a multilateral context and with individual EU member states, about the appropriate legal framework for the fight against terrorism. However, contrary to recent press reports, the United States has not tried to develop a 'framework agreement' on renditions with either Austria or the EU." Rather, as part of America's ongoing "constructive dialogue with the EU on legal issues," the United States has "explained the limited circumstances under which the United States has used renditions and the legal basis for those renditions. The United States has also pointed out that European countries have used renditions, and that European courts have upheld renditions," the Ambassador stressed, adding that productive discussions with the EU and member states "about issues critical to all of us may be undermined by incomplete public understanding."

## Journalist Exchange Program with the USA

15. Two Austrian journalists have been chosen to participate in the newly-created "US-Austrian Journalism Exchange Fellowship," and will swap workplaces with two American colleagues for six weeks next year. The program is being financed by the Austrian Chancellery, the Austrian Newspapers Association and the US Embassy in Vienna. US Ambassador to Austria Susan McCaw stressed that exchange programs are "the best way to overcome stereotypes and to really get to know a country." According to liberal daily Der Standard online, the recipients of the journalism exchange fellowship, Christoph Prantner from the Standard and Michaela Roithmayr from Life Radio will serve as foreign correspondents and spend six weeks reporting from Washington DC early next year. Two American reporters will replace the Austrians in Vienna during that time. About 60 journalists from Austria and the US applied for the program, which was organized by the Austrian Journalists Training Committee and the US International Center for Journalists.

## Dozens die in Baghdad Suicide Bombing

16. Two car bombs have exploded in central Baghdad, killing more than 50 people and injuring over 140. The blasts went off simultaneously in a central square -- one in a parked car; the other in a vehicle driven by a suicide bomber. Police say the bombs were aimed at a police patrol and a crowd of Iraqis applying for jobs. The blast is the latest in a series of disastrous suicide bombings in Baghdad, mass-circulation tabloid Oesterreich online writes. Meanwhile, Kofi Annan delivered his final speech as UN Secretary General, painting a dramatic picture of the situation in Iraq and calling on the US not to lose sight of its core principles in its fight against terrorism. In what has been widely interpreted as criticism of the policies of US President Bush, Annan stressed that "no nation can make itself secure by seeking supremacy over others," Oesterreich says. The outgoing UN Secretary General reiterated his call for a broad dialogue to solve the crisis, which should include not only all factions in Iraq, but also its neighboring states and the United Nation Security Council's five veto powers.

McCaw